DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 479 CS 209 579

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TITLE Perception Stimulation in Creative Writing.
PUB DATE Oct 85
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (20th, Portland, ME, October 24-26, 1985).
PUB TYPE Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Style; *Creative Writing; Elementary Secondary Education; *Imagery; *Perception; *Perceptual Development; Perspective Taking; Pictorial Stimuli; Poetry; *Prewriting; Prose; Verbal Stimuli; Visual Perception

ABSTRACT

When handled well, description can give poetry and prose a quality of immediacy and accessibility by creating a dramatic context in which the writer's ideas and feelings can be shared by the reader. The use of perception stimulation can aid the student in producing effective images that lead to this dramatic context. To begin this learning process, students need to develop into accurate and sensitive perceivers by realizing, first, that people often do not perceive carefully enough and, second, that they perceive differently. A number of exercises can demonstrate these points. One exercise tests the students' ability to read carefully by asking them to follow a series of directions. Another exercise asks the class to reproduce a geometric configuration through verbal directions. After students realize that people perceive differently and often not well enough, exercises can be used to encourage them to strive for accurate and sensitive perception, which leads to effective images--images that are specific, concrete, and unique, and that create a clear picture of an object as well as convey an attitude or impression toward it by using figurative language and connotations. Finally, the Zen perspective on perception can be used to help students acquire and use the skills just learned by focusing the quality of their observations. (Sample exercises are included.) (HOD)

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Perception Stimulation in Creative Writing

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When handled well, description can give poetry and prose a quality of immediacy and accessibility by creating a dramatic context in which the writer's ideas and feelings can be shared by the reader. Many beginning creative writers, however, identify ideas and feelings for the reader rather than constructing a descriptive, dramatic context that creates them. Such writers have a tendency to tell rather than to show, to add significance to an image rather than to reveal it within an image. Their images become less effective as they diminish the reader's ability to become imaginatively and dramatically involved with the poem or story. Moreover, images become less dramatically intense as the overuse of modifiers, the use of stuffy diction, and predictable poetic and fictive technique occur. After exemplifying these occurrences, this essay will present a strategy of perception stimulation which can aid the student in producing effective images which lead to a dramatic, descriptive context for poetry and fiction.

Many creative writing instructors have seen passages similar to the ones included here. In the first sample, the writer utilizes eleven modifiers in two sentences:

> The dank smell of wet asphalt and the oily fumes of automobile fuel rose from the traffic jammed city streets. I let my gaze wander along the sloppy tarmac where slush turned into murky water under the thick tread of ebony tires.

The overuse of modifiers diminishes the impact of the passage and each of its modifiers. The next selection includes a predictable triteness

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in the first two lines and an awkward, stuffy quality in the final three lines:

> You're the promise of tomorrow,
> The answer to today.
> You're the magic of a sunset
> Across an endless sea.
> Our yesterdays were such
> That leave no room for regrets...
> And our memories shall cherish the moments.

But also notice lines three and four. We might ask in what way is the sunset "magic," and why is the sea "endless"? Clearly, the student is trying to add significance to the image of the sunset over an ocean rather than pulling significance or implication out of the image. Such a tendency is commonplace among beginning writers.

Another tendency is to <u>tell</u> the reader by identifying ideas and feelings rather than <u>showing</u> them to the reader. In a line such as "Damn! she swore explicitly," we see this propensity. In what way can we say "damn" other than explicitly? The context from which this quote comes clearly showed the character's anger and explicitness without the writer having to identify it. The temptation proved, however, overwhelming. Finally, we have an example of the predictably abstract and vague approach to poetry:

> Groping, reaching
> Unable to touch
> Searching, looking
> Unable to find.
>
> Exploring, finding
> I touch the edge
> Growing, maturing
> I find it all.

The student thinks the effect of his/her writing resides in elusiveness instead of in a concrete image or situation. As a result, no concrete dramatic situation is created and no reader involvement occurs.

Such writers must learn to pull meaning and feeling out of their images, to isolate the provocative image, and thus to create dramatic context and intensity in which the reader can participate. To begin this learning process, the writer needs to develop into an accurate and sensitive perceiver by realizing first of all that people often do not perceive carefully enough and secondly that they perceive differently. The following series of exercises demonstrates these points about the crucial quality of observation.

The first exercise tests the student's ability to read carefully by asking him/her to follow these directions:

1. Read everything before doing anything.
2. Put your name in the upper right hand corner of this paper.
3. Circle the word "NAME" in sentence 2.
4. Draw 5 small squares in the upper left hand corner of this paper.
5. Put an "X" in each square.
6. Put a circle around each square.
7. Sign your name under the title of this paper.
8. After the title, write, "YES,YES,YES."
9. Put a circle around sentence 7.
10. Put an "X" in the lower left hand corner of this paper.
11. Draw a triangle around the "X" you just made.

12. On the back side of this paper, multiply 103 by 66.

13. Draw a rectangle around the word "paper" in sentence 7.

14. LOUDLY call out your first name when you get to this point.

15. If you think you have followed the directions carefully, call out LOUDLY, "I have!"

16. On the reverse side of this paper, add 8950 and 9805.

17. Put a circle around your answer, then put a square around the circle.

18. Count out in a normal speaking voice, from 1 to 10 BACKWARDS!

19. Punch 3 (three) holes (small) in the top of this paper with your pencil (pen) point.

20. If you are the first person to get this far, call out LOUDLY "I am the FIRST person to reach this point, and I am the leader in following direction!"

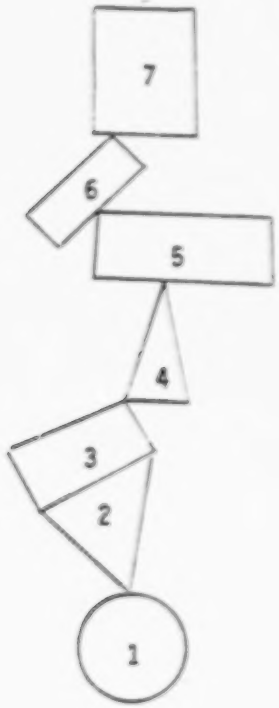
21. Underline all EVEN numbers on this side of the page.

22. Say LOUDLY, "I am nearly finished, and I have followed directions!"

23. Now that you have finished reading carefully, do only sentences 1 and 2.

Usually, numbers fourteen and fifteen produce some loud noises, and at number twenty a few students proudly proclaim that they are the leaders in following directions. (Yes, they place an "s" on the word "direction" in number twenty.) And of course, sighs occur after number twenty-three. This exercise indicates that we do not carefully perceive even relatively simple messages. The next exercise deals with a complex message.

A student volunteer is asked to face the chalkboard and through verbal directions only enable the remainder of the class to reproduce this geometric configuration:



Difficulty arises because the volunteer assumes that the listeners, and by implication the readers of his/her descriptive writing, think, feel, and perceive as he/she does. As a result, the class will be told to place a triangle below the rectangle. What specific type of triangle (right, equilateral, isosceles) and where exactly it touches the rectangle are bits of information often omitted. In addition to making assumptions about his listeners and readers, the volunteer is also guilty of selective perception; the numbers within the figures are seldom noticed and seldom given to the listeners.

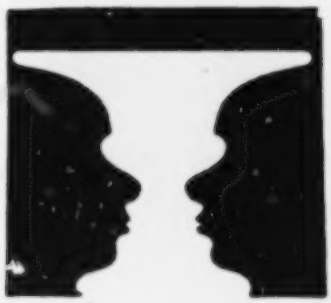
Another way to exemplify selective perception is to use a message such as

. Many students do not perceive this specific triangle but instead selectively "perceive" a message generated by a perceptual set or previous experience -- "a bird in the hand is worth... ." The student can now realize the danger of such perceptual sets and the necessity of perceiving an object as if it were his/her first encounter with it. Even if a perceptual set is not present, however, a person can prematurely reach closure and thus can be perceiving the same object differently than other people do.

This possibility can be demonstrated by eliciting responses to a configuration such as A 13 C. The context of marks leads many students to see A B C, but others who do not "complete" the figures see A, thirteen, and a C. Such closure is beneficial if it gives the writer and reader a unique perception, a surprise; unfortunately it often tends to uniformity of perception (ABC).

The student must come to realize that the perceiver can interpret the object being perceived differently for others in a beneficial sense. With this figure , for example, the student can isolate several different interpretations, including a diamond between parallel lines, a W on top of an M, or a K with its reverse image ꓘ. This exercise enables the student to see the benefit of perceiving fully and uniquely in a divergent fashion rather than a convergent one. Similarly, the ambiguous figures found in many Psycho-

logy texts demonstrate this benefit of seeking different, unique perceptions of an object. A common example is the goblet/profile figure below:



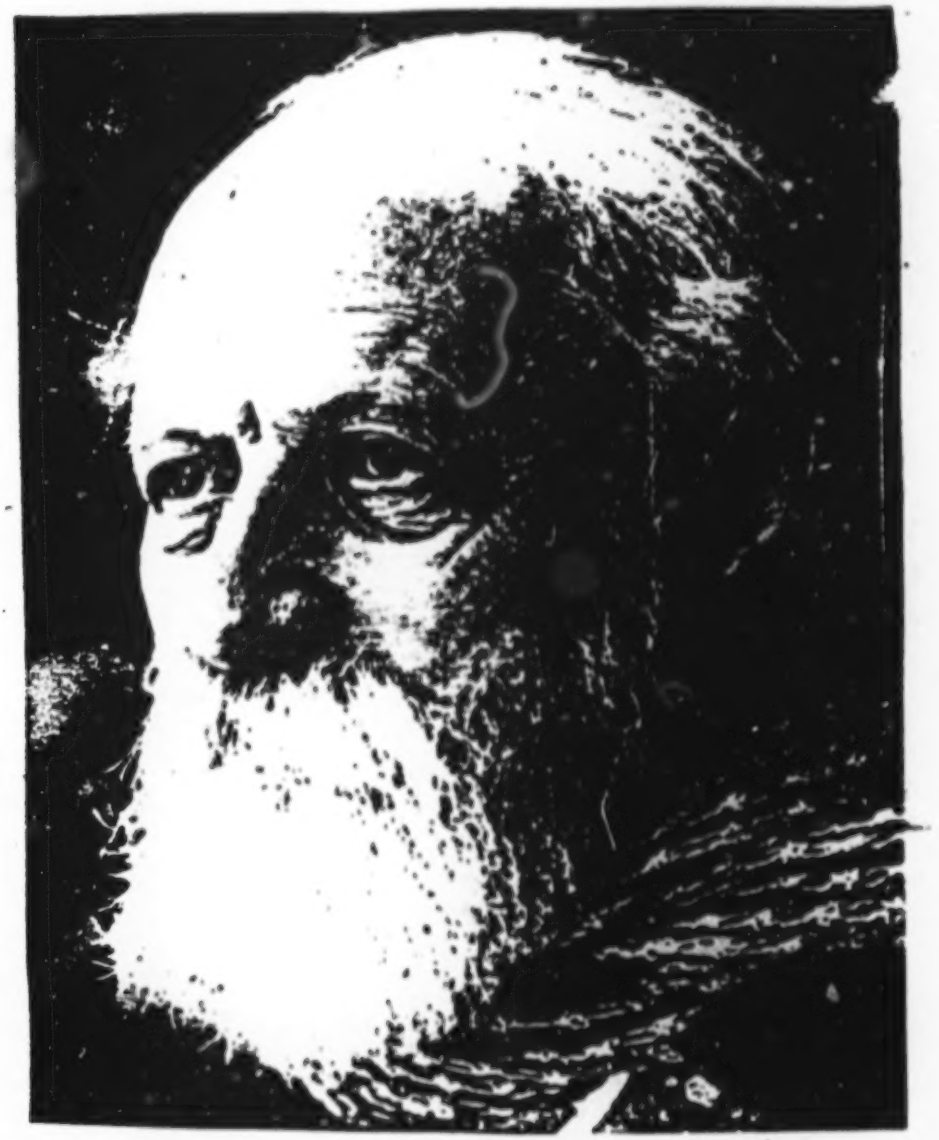
Such exercises foster perceiving well and uniquely.

After the writer realizes that people perceive differently and often not well enough, exercises can be used to encourage the student to strive for accurate and sensitive perception which leads to effective images, images that are specific, concrete, and unique, images that create a clear picture of an object plus convey an attitude or impression toward it by using figurative language and connotations. What is stressed is, of course, close to William Carlos Williams' dictum, "No ideas but in things," generating in other words, a focus of meaning that shows the unity of idea and thing, meaning and image. One exercise to achieve this goal involves the sense of smell.

Each student must smell the contents of several jars which include substances such as vinegar and nail polish remover. The student is not to identify the substance but is to describe the smell by creating a context in which the reader can experience the smell. Listing on the board the students' terms for the smells will isolate commonly generated details such as "pungent," "acid-like," "bittersweet," "sickening," and "like moldy Velveeta cheese." Discussion of

these terms reveals that "pungent" and "sickening" are not as specific and concrete as "acid-like" or "like moldy Velveeta cheese." And, of course, "bittersweet" exemplifies the overused detail which must be replaced by a unique detail.

Practice in isolating and generating specific, concrete, and unique details also can involve reacting to a picture such as the one of an old man below.



The student is asked to isolate details and descriptive terms to provide a clear picture of this specific old man, not old men in general, and to convey an attitude toward this particular old man. In other words, the student is to isolate concrete details instinct with the overall impression being conveyed, details that justify the impression. One place to start is with the apparent similarities of color and texture between the beard and the scarf. The class can describe the beard in terms of the scarf or the scarf in terms of the beard. A term like "chalk-white" can be introduced to replace the ubiquitous and trite "snow white beard." "Chalk-white" conveys an off-white color and the gritty texture of both the beard and the scarf. A term such as "bone white" can then be introduced to convey not only color and texture but a sense of age and decay ("bone" refers to bleached bones found in a meadow); three senses are stimulated in one descriptive term.

A similar effect can be created by using "rust spots," with its sense of color and age, in place of "age spots" or "dirty brown spots" to refer to the pigmentation on the forehead. The term "rust spots" has a more positive connotation than "dirty brown spots." And of course, a careful perceiver must note the indentation on the bridge of the man's nose. Such exercises encourage descriptive details that are specific, concrete, and unique in their conveying of a clear picture and an attitude toward the object being described.

At this point, the Zen perspective on perception can be introduced as a model to help the writer acquire and use the skills just tested by focusing the quality of his/her observation. Beginning with the Zen belief that the separation between perceiver and the object

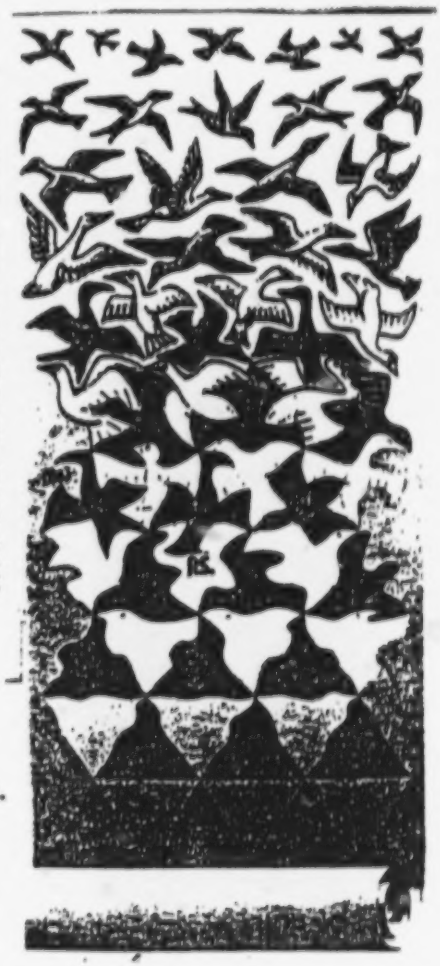
being perceived is dangerous and illusory leads to the realization that in its place we need a spontaneous identification with the object being perceived, an "ecstasy" in which the self identifies with all that exists. The effective image can be presented as the object or experience being perceived minus the writer's feelings, which results in a unity of perspective. The student is thus urged to become as the little child who does not observe the universe but is at rest at its center. Essentially, this model encourages an alternative, haiku-like mode of perceiving, one that taps into the brain's right hemisphere, which stores images and symbols, while using the left hemisphere's language to express them. This method of perceiving invites the student to do as Whitman did while at Timber Creek where he said, "Somehow I seem'd to get identity with each and every thing and me in its condition. Nature was naked, and I was also" (Stovall 1:152)

This intense identity characterizes other artists as well. The pianist Lorin Hollander recalls, for example, that at the age of three he played the keyboard and carefully chose each tone because when he played a tone he became the tone to "become more fully me" ("Child's Play"). The teenage violin prodigy Me Dore states, moreover, that she likes the violin because "It is me" (Child's Play"). This intense identification, or oneness, is also nicely visualized in many of M. C. Escher's lithographs.

Douglas Hofstadter, in his work Gödel, Escher, Bach: an Eternal Golden Braid, discusses several of these lithographs in terms of the recursive figure. Hofstadter explains that a figure constitutes positive space (P.S. below), but once it is drawn within an enclosed frame it consequently forms a complementary shape called nega-

tive space or background. A figure whose ground is a figure in its own right is what Hofstadter terms a recursive figure (67). Two examples of recursive figures are the following Escher lithographs used by Hofstadter:

Tiling of the plane using birds (68)



Liberation (57)

Such recursive figures present a visual analogue of the Zen unity discussed above. Just as dark birds and light birds come from a common grayness, so the Zen unity exists within the apparent duality of subject/object or perceiver/object being perceived.

The perception exercises and unified vision discussed here are a means to prepare the writer to perceive and conceptualize from unique perspectives. In particular, the Zen perspective or Zen unity

is a way to get "into" a work, image, or scene by generating ideas, feelings, and details, an important process even though later revisions of a creative work may require a distancing persona. This approach to perceiving stimulates the following:

a) the writer's identification with the object being perceived/described, an identification with other selves;
b) perception from different perspectives;
c) the image reserve of the right hemisphere of the brain to respond to the creative urge;
d) active/unique perception;
e) transformation in language usage, vision, and the self.

This unity of the perceiver and the object being perceived recalls Romantic notions of the imagination. Keats' "camelian poet" and Hazlitt's "sympathetic identification" come quickly to mind as does Whitman's merging of the external and internal. These Romantic notions have allowed poetry even today to explore alternative worlds, to question the objective world, to draw things into unity. Similar approaches are seen to varying degrees in the Symbolists' "consciousness of truth," in Pound's Vorticism, and even in the "inspired improvisation" of some Beat writers. But Zen is novel; even in a conservative world it strikes a responsive chord in students that Hazlitt and Pound do not. Using the Zen perspective and the various perception exercises as explained here can stimulate writers to utilize a conceptual schema that initiates them into their own dramatic involve-

ment with an idea, experience, or object. This involvement can then lead to creating a dramatic context for the reader to experience a poem or story.

This perspective has helped students to produce writing that is specific, concrete, and dramatic. Notice the dramatic involvement for writer, speaker, and reader that results from the careful use of immediate and vivid descriptive details and analogies in the images quoted below:

> I looked around at how the red revolving lights
> from the ambulance and police cars made us all
> appear as though we were bathed in the man's
> blood.

> Not even breath stirs
> The closing ices
> That crack and craze
> Like plates in some closet
> Use has sent
> To age in silence.

> So I was quiet while the corners [of the mind] gave way
> And rolled up like linoleum.

> full of Congo cocaine
> [he] screamed about the insect highways
> paved in his veins.

This essay is clearly not intended as a comparative study of various methodologies utilized in various creative writing classes. It is, however, an explanation of an approach to perception stimulation and image generation that has produced promising results so far. It

presents a model for perceiving that can focus the writer's ability to intensely identify with an object or experience and thus generate effective images, those that are specific, concrete, and unique. Such images enable the writer to create a descriptive, dramatic context by conveying a clear, accurate picture as well as an attitude, both of which involve the reader in the writing.

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